
“The Salem Witch Mania”: Recent Scholarship and American History Textbooks

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A critical presentation of recent research on the Salem witch trials, this essay contrasts new scholarly findings with outdated accounts in current American history textbooks. The article draws attention to current scholarship that emphasizes the central role of religion in the Salem episode in contrast to past work that focuses on social and political aspects. The new research has significantly changed elements of the traditional textbook narrative and our understanding of some of the episode's central figures. Religious conflict and the fear of Satan's attempt to destroy the local village church now appear to have been the driving forces.

IT IS WELL KNOWN that the Salem witchcraft episode is different from any other witchcraft outbreak in New England. It lasted longer, jailed more suspects, condemned and executed more people, ranged over more territory, and afterwards was quickly repudiated by the government as a colossal mistake—a great delusion. In the end, the fifteen-month affair, across twenty-four different communities, resulted in 162 arrests, fifty-four confessions, twenty-eight convictions, twenty executions, and five deaths in jail due to poor conditions. Some 1,600 people are named in approximately 950 extant court records. As Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum pointed out in the 1970s, the excesses

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, March 2010, Vol. 78, No. 1, pp. 40–64
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfp084

Advance Access publication on January 27, 2010

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of the Salem episode were caused by “something deeper than the kind of chronic, petty squabbles between near neighbors which seem to have been at the root of earlier and far less severe witchcraft episodes in New England.”¹

Historians’ attempts to identify this “something deeper” in ways that make sense to us today have generally focused upon the social, political, and psychological aspects of the witchcraft accusations and less upon the religious world of witchcraft beliefs and fears expressed in the court testimonies themselves. The most recent scholarship indicates that a new story is taking shape, one that places religion at the center of the episode. The story now emerging from the abundant village records, sermons, and court testimonies is about the discord in Salem village over its new minister and about Satan’s attack on the minister’s family. The narrative in the court documents quickly develops from the outcries of a few “afflicted girls” in church member families into a tale of Satanic conspiracy involving a growing number of witches in eastern Essex County whose aim is to destroy the church in Salem village and, later, all the churches in the Bay Colony. Contemporary American history textbooks still rely on elements of the outdated “standard narrative” produced by historians twenty to thirty years ago. These accounts still portray the Salem episode as a matter of governmental instability, Caribbean voodoo, teenage hysteria, and emergent capitalism.² Drawing on outdated scholarship, the general uniformity of textbook accounts gives the appearance that historians have reached a settled understanding of the Salem tragedy which has not been the case since 1992. A profound tension exists between what scholars now believe they understand about the Salem witch trials and the stories most history textbooks continue to tell about it.

The purpose of this essay is not, however, to disparage current editions of American history textbooks, which are notoriously difficult to keep up to date, but rather to present the new account that is taking shape with its focus on religious factors by contrasting it with parts of the old story that still linger in the textbooks. Although the new scholarship certainly does not answer all the questions, it makes the Salem story not only more accurate and more complex, but also more

¹Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974: 33–35).

²I owe to Mary Beth Norton the notion of a “standard narrative” contained in outdated scholarship on the Salem witch trials. She used this theme to highlight the findings of her recent book *In The Devil’s Snare* (2002) in a lecture delivered to the Massachusetts Historical Society in February 2002. Norton’s entry on Salem in her textbook *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* (2005) is the only textbook account that is entirely free from remnants of the older narrative.

interesting and more relevant to religious studies than the textbook versions are able to show.

For two centuries, textbooks have played an enormous role in the teaching of American history. In the nineteenth century, the first schoolbooks, written mostly by New England authors, presented the Salem episode as a cautionary tale of fraud, judicial gullibility, and superstition. The general purpose of the textbooks was to explain the origins and development of the new nation and to “train citizens in character,” aiming to instill moral principles into the youth of the New Republic.³ The Salem debacle was used to illustrate the new nation’s moral progress from a dark Puritan colonial past to the enlightened American present, and placed the Salem story firmly in the American historical consciousness.⁴ Moreover, as the historian Gretchen Adams has pointed out, in planting the Salem story in the American imagination, the schoolbooks prepared American readers to see the larger moral implications embedded in the story as part of America’s emerging national literature. By the mid-nineteenth century, notable literary figures in New England, including Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Whittier, were using the witchcraft trials as significant plot elements creating dramatic portraits of the heroes and villains involved.⁵

MORAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

Today’s students often read about the Salem witch trials against the background of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and *Young Goodman Brown* and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, literature commonly assigned in high school advanced placement English classes. American history textbooks, however, rarely refer to the Salem story’s long history as a tale of unjust moral and political persecution. One exception is the account written in 1997 by the British historian Paul Johnson, who concludes that “The Salem trials can be seen as an example of the propensity of the American people to be convulsed by spasms of self-righteous rage against enemies, real or imagined . . .”⁶ Another textbook written in 2005 observes: “The story of this deeply troubled town [of Salem] challenges us to confront the possibility that we, too, might allow law and authority to become instruments of injustice.”⁷ These

³Ruth M. Elson (1964: 1); Cf. also John A. Nietz (1961).

⁴See, Adams (2008).

⁵Adams (2008: 65, 114).

⁶Johnson (1998: 83).

⁷Divine et al. (2005: 86).

two examples notwithstanding, today's textbooks generally ignore Salem's long-standing moral and political significance which, ironically, is the basis of its continuing relevance in the American historical imagination.

THE STANDARD NARRATIVE

The 300th anniversary of the Salem witch trials in 1992 saw the beginning of a steady stream of scholarly books and articles which have revised our understanding of the Salem episode. Nevertheless, drawing on pre-1992 historical work, contemporary editions of history textbooks present five central elements of the now outdated narrative: (1) The escalation of witchcraft accusations in Salem village was the result of governmental "disarray" and "confusion" during the inter-charter period (1689–92) which allowed the witchcraft accusations to intensify and multiply; (2) The unwitting instigator of the whole affair was a Caribbean Indian (or African American or African) slave named Tituba who lived in the house of the newly appointed minister of Salem village, the Reverend Samuel Parris, and frightened the two young girls in his household by telling them witchcraft stories and performing magical rituals; (3) Alternatively, the girls became hysterical after dabbling independently in the forbidden practice of fortune-telling; (4) The driving force behind the initial witchcraft accusations in the village was not religion per se but the deep and festering economic disparity between the poorer, more conservative farmers of the western part of Salem village and the more commercial and secular minded residents of the seaport town of Salem; and (5) Governor Sir William Phips halted the trials only after socially prominent people were accused, including his wife.

The elements of this once standard narrative were corrected and revised in the scholarship of the 1990s.⁸ The first question concerns the impact of New England's politically anomalous inter-charter period, 1689–92. During this period, Massachusetts lacked both a governor and a royal charter after the overthrow of the Andros government in Boston in 1689, following the "Glorious Revolution" in England. Most of the textbooks begin with general claim that Massachusetts's lack of a fully constituted government had something important to do with the runaway witchcraft accusations in Salem village which began at this

⁸I have read the relevant parts of the most recent editions of thirteen major, multi-authored American history textbooks, most dating from 2004 through 2007. All of these texts have seen multiple editions and several revisions.

time. One account puts it this way: "During the three years between [Governor] Andros's overthrow and the arrival of the royal governor in 1692, the colony lacked a legally established government. In this atmosphere of uncertainty, an outbreak of accusations of witchcraft in Salem grew to unprecedented proportions."⁹ Another explains that "Salem village was a gloomy, dispirited and divided place in 1692. And without a charter or a viable government in Boston, there was no countervailing force within the colony to resist the onslaught of events."¹⁰ Another speculates that the "Instability of the Massachusetts government following Andros's arrest . . . allowed what under normal political conditions would have been an isolated, though ugly, local incident to expand into a major colonial crisis."¹¹

Recent scholarship sees the impact of the inter-charter period in different ways. One scholar attributes the delay in the trials not to the absence of a charter but to the cautious interim governor Simon Bradstreet who refused to initiate any witchcraft trials, following the traditionally conservative approach of Massachusetts ministers and magistrates. Another scholar has argued that the delay in holding trials motivated the Salem justices to go forward with arrests and aggressive prosecution of suspects in order to gain the strongest possible evidence for trials when the new charter arrived.¹²

But the question of whether the three-month delay from March to June in holding the trials allowed the accusations to get out of hand as the textbooks suggest simply cannot be known. It is significant, however, that when the grand jury indictments and trials took place in June, including the execution of Bridget Bishop, strong prosecutorial action did nothing to stop the accusations. Indeed, by the end of June, fresh accusations against new suspects occurred, and they accelerated in July and throughout the rest of the summer and early fall despite continuing trials and executions. By mid-June, the government was fully restored, yet the onslaught of accusations and trials progressed unabated. In other words, the inter-charter situation does not appear to explain why the outbreak of witchcraft accusations became uncontrollable in Salem village and then spread elsewhere once governmental authority was fully restored and the trials had begun.

Examining chronology and geography in greater detail than previous scholarship, historians now recognize that the Salem "episode"

⁹Goldfield (2007: 102).

¹⁰Dufor (1994: 250).

¹¹Divine et al. (2005: 86).

¹²Rosenthal (1993: 30) and Norton (2002: 40–41).

was not a single unified event, as portrayed in the textbooks, but rather “a sequence of limited brief, and targeted flare-ups” that broke out sequentially in separate towns—a total of twenty-five, mainly in Essex County—and spread from one to another, involving only a few witchcraft suspects in each community.¹³ The one geographic and social constant was the core group of five young female accusers in Salem village (aged eleven to twenty) whom the Salem judges called upon to act out their “fits” and spectral visions in court to confirm each accusation. Throughout the episode, these courtroom performances were used to legitimate the arrests and indictments for accusations that originated from Salem village and elsewhere in eastern Essex County. The one common factor among the Salem village’s young accusers is that they belonged to families of prominent church members in the village who feared that the church was under attack.

TITUBA’S CONFESSION AND RELIGIOUS DISCORD

As for the immediate cause of the accusations in Salem village, several textbooks still point to Samuel Parris’s American Indian slave Tituba as the unwitting instigator—the “fatal spark,” as Marion Starkey once put it.¹⁴ Several history texts begin by describing scenes of Tituba performing magical rites and engaging in fortune-telling, even “voodoo” rituals, in the Parris household and frightening nine-year-old Betty Parris and her eleven-year-old cousin Abigail Williams, who were the initial accusers. Tituba’s purported role as the American Indian (or African American or African) slave who set Salem village against itself still captures the imagination of some of the textbook writers. One asks whether it was “the spooky tales of a slave in the home of Reverend Samuel Parris named Tituba” that set off the girls who started it all?¹⁵ Another states that “Several young girls experimented with magic, aided by a slave woman, Tituba . . .”¹⁶ Nothing of this sort can be found in the original sources.

In a watershed chapter in *Salem Story* and in a subsequent article in the *New England Quarterly*, Bernard Rosenthal has shown that the stories about Tituba’s performing of magic rites and frightening the girls, making her the initial protagonist of the story, have no foundation in the primary sources.¹⁷ There is no basis in any of the court records

¹³Richard Latner (2008a: 137–156).

¹⁴Marion Starkey (1949 [1969]: 34).

¹⁵Joseph R. Conlin (2009: 66).

¹⁶Edward Ayers (2006: 61).

¹⁷Rosenthal (1993: chap. 2, 1998).

or in contemporary accounts for saying that Tituba “told fortunes and practiced magic on the side,” in the words of another textbook.¹⁸ Tituba was indeed one of the first three people accused, but none of the sources mention her performing occult rituals or telling stories of witchcraft to the girls or teaching them fortune-telling. Rosenthal’s investigations show that the origins of this long accepted tradition are to be found in embellished historical accounts dating from the eighteenth century and in early-nineteenth-century literary fiction.

Rosenthal also dismisses the more recent identification of Tituba as African, noting that every single reference to her in the court documents and other contemporary sources classifies her as “Indian” and never as “Negro,” a term that was used in reference to slaves of African origins and to two African slaves who were involved in the trials. She may have come from Barbados or be of Spanish Indian heritage, but that is also unknown. Tituba’s racial identity changed after the Civil War, when the institution of slavery and African American ethnicity were closely identified. A perceptive article written in 1974 shows that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the first to transform Tituba from Indian to half-Negro and half-Indian in his play *Giles Corey of Salem Farms*, and thereafter historians have repeated this change in ethnicity.¹⁹ Sometime later Tituba evolved into a fully African slave. Tituba has become a mythic figure of biblical proportions in recent understandings of Salem, an archetypal “dark Eve,” to use Rosenthal’s phrase. Thus Rosenthal concludes that “[a]s in the originary myth of the Fall a woman, here a dark skinned one, has carried the burden of sin and loss.”²⁰

Mary Beth Norton in *In the Devil’s Snare* (2002) exposes as false another long-held assumption found in the textbooks: that the two girls in the Parris parsonage, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, engaged in fortune-telling that backfired. One textbook puts it this way: “The Salem [witchcraft] outbreak began in early February 1692 with episodes of fortune-telling among young girls. . . . In Salem village, a small group gathered at the house of Rev. Samuel Parris that included in nine-year-old daughter, Betty, his niece Abigail Williams, and two of their friends. But things began to get out of hand, and the girls became frightened and upset.”²¹ Norton points out that the notion of the afflicted girls practicing fortune-telling stems from a misreading of the Reverend John

¹⁸Carnes and Garraty (2006: 65).

¹⁹Chadwick Hansen (1974: 6–7).

²⁰Rosenthal (1998: 190).

²¹Dufour (1994: 248–249).

Hale's contemporary account in which he says that he knew one of the young "afflicted" persons in Salem episode who engaged in fortune-telling and that he knew of another woman who also engaged in this practice.²² Nowhere, however, does Hale identify these Salem females by name nor does he refer to the act of fortune-telling in his central narrative of the Salem episode.

Eliminating Tituba as the "dark Eve" of the story and eliminating the girls' dabbling in fortune-telling leaves the "standard account" without a beginning, as one textbook now recognizes.²³

The immediate context of the first accusations, however, is well known. It is the intense and well-documented religious controversy in Salem village between the Reverend Samuel Parris and some of the village residents who refused to join his congregation.²⁴ Historians writing in the 1990s recognized that Parris's inflammatory sermons in which he divided the village between the "chosen" and the "wicked & unconverted" exacerbated the conflict between church members and the majority of villagers who refused to join. Preached months before the accusations began, Parris's aggressive sermons accused his opponents of "betrayal" of the church. In his sacrament day sermon before the girls in his house voiced their initial accusations Parris warned of Satan's attempt to "pull down" his church—a charge tantamount to an accusation of witchcraft.

Two recent studies published in 2006 and 2007 emphasize that the village conflict over Parris concerned the deeply contentious matter of church polity: the rules of membership in the village church covenant.²⁵ Parris and his small group of followers instituted the restrictive and unpopular old covenant at a time when most New England congregations, including the mother church in Salem Town, had switched to the more liberal Halfway covenant that widened the door to church membership. The more inclusive Halfway covenant allowed parents who were unsure of testifying in public about God's direct intervention in their lives to baptize their children, a sacrament that was popularly believed to be necessary for salvation. After some initial growth and a spate of baptisms, Parris's opponents in the village managed to stop

²²Norton (2002: 23). Norton rightly dismisses Cotton Mather's general reference to occult practices, among which he lists fortune-telling, as the trigger for the witchcraft accusations in Salem village in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London, 1702). Mather undoubtedly read Hale's book which was published in 1697 and may have been influenced by it.

²³David Murrin et al. (2005: 104).

²⁴See, e.g., Cooper and Minkema (1993), Gragg (1990), Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974), and Upham (1867).

²⁵Ray (2007), Latner (2006); cf. Norton (2002: 17–18).

other villagers from joining the covenant. A village meeting in October 1691 elected Parris's opponents to the Village Committee which proceeded to cut off Parris's pay and his firewood, and question his claim to the village parsonage and land.

For months, Parris fought back from the pulpit with harangues aimed at the "wicked and unconverted" villagers trying to hinder the work of Christ. He pointedly warned that "the wiles of the devil" were operating against his church, thus demonizing his opponents. Given Parris's position at the center of the struggle and the urgent meetings of church members in his house trying to deal with the crisis, it is not surprising that the young children in his household would be the first to be affected by his alarming sermons and congregational anxieties about "agents of the devil" threatening his ministry.

Once the accusations began, scholars now emphasize that it was Tituba whose confession supplied the shocking evidence of a Satanic conspiracy aimed at the embattled minister. She told of several witches from Boston whose specters met invisibly in the minister's house and recruited witches in the village. The record of Tituba's examination shows that the nature and directions of the magistrates' questions determined much her testimony. They pressed her to admit that the Devil had spoken directly to her and urged her to describe what the Devil looked like (a man dressed in black). The magistrates also introduced the Puritan concept of signing the Devil's book, that is, making a covenant with the Devil, which Tituba readily confessed to doing. Then she volunteered that there were as many as nine witches meeting in Parris's house, some from Boston, and the magistrates demanded the names of these other witches which Tituba said were unknown to her. Thus the witch-hunt began.

According to one contemporary source, Parris physically beat Tituba prior to her preliminary examination and told her what to say. Whether or not this is true, Tituba's alarming testimony of a witchcraft conspiracy against the minister's household abundantly confirmed Parris's dark warnings about Satan's attack on his ministry. Tituba was interrogated five times, more than any other defendant, and sometimes at great length. Her life was in the balance, and she tried desperately to give the magistrates what they wanted to hear. When they asked "how to you goe [to Boston]? Whatt do you ride Ride upon?" Tituba told how she rode upon a pole and flew through the air, and in the same way she flew to the houses two church member families and attacked their children.

The effect of Tituba's confession, coerced or not, was significant, and it set the course for judicial conduct of future examinations.

Thereafter, accusations of witchcraft were no longer understood merely to be about matters of neighbor-on-neighbor malice or torment but were seen as part of a larger Satanic plan to destroy the village church and eventually all the churches in New England. After Tituba, references to “signing the Devil’s book,” witches’ “meetings” (held next to the minister’s house), a “black man,” Satanic masses, and the naming of suspects became routine features voiced by accusers and confessors alike. In mid-March, the former minister of Salem village the Reverend Deodat Lawson claimed that the village’s dispute over its minister was one of the reasons that Satan was attacking the village, especially its church members. By the end of the month, Lawson estimated that the specters of twenty-three or twenty-four witches has been (spectrally) seen meeting in the village where Satan was attempting to establish his kingdom.²⁶

JUDICIAL MOTIVES AND LEGAL IRREGULARITIES

Analysis of the magistrates’ aggressive interrogations raises the question of the judges’ motives. As both John Murrin and Norton have emphasized, “The Salem tragedy could not have happened without a dramatic reversal of thirty years of judicial restraint in resolving complaints about witchcraft.”²⁷

With the full sequence of the legal process laid out before them, scholars are focusing for the first time on judicial motives. Why, for example, did the Salem court continue to rely so heavily upon questionable “spectral” evidence when it had been accorded far less significance in previous New England witch trials?

Indeed, after the execution of Bridget Bishop and the condemnation of four other suspects, the governor asked Boston’s leading clergy for advice. The ministers cautioned the magistrates on the use of spectral evidence but urged them to prosecute aggressively all witchcraft suspects. Historians now agree that the ministers’ reply, which was written by the enthusiastic witch-hunter Cotton Mather, sent an ambiguous message. The court ignored clerical caution and proceeded to prosecute without making any changes in the rules of evidence.

Indeed, the magistrates may have refused to listen to the Boston clergy because all of them had recently been appointed to the Governor’s Council by the Crown and did not owe any allegiance to the

²⁶Deodat Lawson (1914: 163).

²⁷Murrin et al. (2003: 312).

clergy. As the Colony's newly established civil authority, Council's job was to restore the institutions of government and impose political order. The first new problem the Governor and his Council faced was the chaos in Salem that was spreading all over Essex County and filling the jails. Thus it happened that even before the arrival of the Charter, the Salem justices began to over-reach themselves and employ unusual methods to discover and aggressively prosecute witchcraft suspects for a plot that seemed to be against the church itself.

Scholars point to two major legal irregularities. Against all legal precedent, the Salem justices John Hathorne, Jonathan Corwin, and Bartholomew Gedney, Salem's most powerful men, did not initially require the complainants in Salem village to post the usual monetary bond for prosecution of their complaints, a procedure that protected the court from frivolous charges, especially in capital cases. Instead, the Salem magistrates initially acted on the witchcraft complaints immediately with no bond of assurance.²⁸ They issued arrest warrants, held preliminary hearings, forced numerous false confessions, and remanded the accused to jail for trial. The constant flow of complaints, hearings, and arrests gave the legal process unprecedented momentum and public notoriety, instilling fear and arousing old animosities initially in Salem village and later in two-dozen mostly neighboring towns across Essex county, as towns and villages offered up longstanding personal grudges and feuds. In nearly every case, these accusations were confirmed in the Salem courtroom by the village's young accusers whose performance of spectral "torments" gave the magistrates the evidence they wanted.

Secondly, as Norton indicates in *In the Devil's Snare*, the Salem magistrates did not examine the accusers and the accused separately, as advised by contemporary legal treatises, but brought them together, allowing for collaboration among the accusers and intimidation of the defendants. This practice continued throughout the trials. The Salem magistrates also conducted the preliminary hearings in the presence not only of the accusers but the whole community, following Parris's initial practice of exhibiting the "afflicted" girls to the authorities and curious villagers. As the records reveal, this procedure created a sensational situation and induced a panic in Salem village that spread "plague-like," to use Samuel Parris's own metaphor, to nearby communities which engendered more accusations.

Scholars now realize that the critical point about the initial hearings in Salem village is two-fold. The Salem magistrates immediately

²⁸Rosenthal (2009: 18).

began to force confessions from the suspects by the use of judicial intimidation and by the expectation of indefinite postponement of their trials. Tituba's early confession validated the initial witchcraft charges and later confessors, seeing their trials postponed indefinitely, followed her lead. They described witches' meetings and named other suspects in the same terms as Tituba, and testified that the accused (in spectral form) tried to force them to "sign the Devil's book," turning them into witches. The dramatic courtroom performances together with aggressive judicial interrogation created a daunting atmosphere. If the suspects did not confess, the girls' bodily "fits" nevertheless presented what was believed to be objective evidence of acts of witchcraft inflicted by the defendants. Subsequent depositions describing these "torments" were then used to indict the accused and later to condemn them at their trials.

The textbooks, however, do not focus on the crucial role of the judiciary but, like the popular literature, prefer to highlight the sensational character of the accusations and the tragic fate of the accused. Several textbooks embellish their accounts with illustrations of shocking courtroom scenes as imagined by nineteenth-century illustrators.

Norton has proposed that the judges acted for psychological reasons. As members of the Governor's Council in Boston, they had left the Maine frontier unprotected by pulling out a garrisoned militia force from Falmouth (now Portland) Maine in 1690. The Wabanaki Indians, instigated by Satan, according to Puritan belief, immediately attacked and decimated the small settlement at Falmouth which had to be abandoned. "The judges," Norton suggests, "had too much personally at stake in the outcome [of the trials]. They quickly became invested in believing in the reputed witches' guilt, in large part because they needed to believe that they themselves were not guilty of causing New England's current woes," from Indian attacks of 1689 and 1692. "Unable to defeat Satan in the forests and garrisons of the northeastern frontier," Norton argues, "they could nevertheless attempt to do so in the Salem courtroom."²⁹

Other historians have disagreed.³⁰ Nevertheless, Norton rightly attempts to find a plausible motive for the unusually zealous judicial response to the witchcraft accusations.

Writing in 2005, Richard Francis has proposed that the threat the justices perceived was both unique to the Salem episode and specifically

²⁹Norton (2002: 226).

³⁰See Godbeer (2003), Neal Salisbury (2004), Karlsen (2003), Chaplin (2003), and Alan Taylor (2003).

religious in nature: "The terrible events that began [with the girls] in the Parris parsonage in Salem Village were ultimately brought about by the anxiety that the whole of the Christian adventure in the New England wilderness had been based on a superannuated dream."³¹ A more recent study concludes that "[I]t seems apparent that the belief that Satan had targeted village church members and that he had planned a wider assault on the churches of the colony produced an unprecedented number of witchcraft accusations and executions."³² Having played a key role in authorizing Parris's ordination in Salem village, the Salem magistrates were heavily invested in the success of the new village ministry, and, like the ministers of neighboring churches, they believed the threat to the village church to be real. Something of this magnitude—a whole congregation under attack—was unique in New England experience.

Only a perceived assault of this magnitude on New England's key institution, the church, seems to explain the magistrates' otherwise unprecedented reliance on spectral evidence and their efforts to force dozens of confessions. Otherwise, historians are left to explain the magistrates' actions as colossal judicial credulity. A simplistic understanding of this kind, while acceptable to nineteenth-century writers, appears less satisfactory to contemporary historians who seek greater insight.

If scholars have recently tried to discern the motives of the magistrates as a group, the motivation of the special court's most influential justice, Lieutenant Governor William Stoughton, who was the chief magistrate, is also significant. Norton notes that Stoughton could be "rigid and imperious" and concludes that his judicial record reveals "a man certain of his judgments and unwilling to entertain any opposition."³³ It was Stoughton who set the rules of evidence overwhelmingly in favor of rarely used spectral testimony. Stoughton, too, decided that nearly all the indictments would be based on evidence of alleged spectral "torture" observed in the "fits" performed in court by the young female accusers, even though it was obvious to contemporary observers that the afflicted girls never suffered any more than temporary physical impairment. Stoughton's firm views about the validity of spectral evidence were well known at the time, and he is reported to have said that during the trials that "he had the fear of God before his eyes" and saw no reason to apologize.³⁴

³¹Richard Francis (2005: xiv).

³²Ray (2007: 95).

³³Norton (2002: 197–198).

³⁴Sibley (1873: 201).

Stoughton received an MA from Oxford and served in parishes in England and later in Massachusetts, and his theological convictions may have played a role in his understanding of the accusations. In a letter thanking Cotton Mather for writing a defense of the trials in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, Stoughton praised Mather's strong support for the trials and emphasized the apocalyptic circumstances of the witchcraft outbreak: "Such your [Mather's] Discerning of Divine Providences and Periods, now running on apace towards their Glorious Issues in the World; and finally, Such your Good News of The Shortness of the Devils Time, That all Good Men must needs Desire the making of this your Discourse Public to the World . . ." ³⁵ As this statement implies, Stoughton clearly interpreted the Salem episode as part of a millennial contest between Satan and God in New England that was coming to a head, a view that Mather also held.

EMERGENT CAPITALISM AND MAPPING THE ACCUSATIONS

Stoughton, of course, was not acting alone, even though Governor Sir William Phips later tried to blame him for the misguided zealotry of the court. Norton has shown that Governor Phips and the other members of the his Council were all deeply involved. Most of the judges on the witchcraft court of Oyer and Terminer belonged to the Governor's newly appointed Council, and they met regularly in Council in Boston with Phips from June through mid-August during the time when three of the four trial sessions took place. Phips attended these Council meetings, and he knew of the rapidly escalating arrests, trials, and executions. Norton indicates that Phips did not leave Boston for the Maine frontier until mid-August, much later than he admitted to his superiors in England. ³⁶ Clearly, Norton argues, Phips and his Council supported Stoughton's harsh procedures and the reliance on spectral evidence.

Unfortunately, the textbooks, like the popular literature, are more interested in the bizarre testimonies of the accusers than the failure of the religious and political leadership in Salem and Boston. To explain the extraordinary number of accusations emanating from the village, most of the textbooks rely on the interpretation offered by Boyer and Nissenbaum in *Salem Possessed* (1974). As indicated above, *Salem Possessed* argues

³⁵Stoughton ([1914] 1692: 212–213).

³⁶Norton (2002: 286).

that the motives for the accusations were deeply linked to social and economic changes of the time. One textbook puts it this way: "The Salem witch mania was a tragic holdover from a passing culture. Its fury was aggravated by the psychological reaction of traditionally minded folk to the new more commercial secular society of turn-of-century New England."³⁷ Another textbook explains: "This interpretation helps explain why the primary accusations came from the agrarian village while the alleged witches either resided in or were somehow connected to the market-oriented town. Perhaps the charge of witchcraft masked a deep resentment for their neighbors' monetary success and the new set of values that accompanied the market economy."³⁸

In *Salem Possessed*, Boyer and Nissenbaum published a map of the accusations in Salem village, showing that "the alleged witches and those who accused them lived on opposite sides of the village."³⁹ The map appeared to support the socioeconomic interpretation that the village was divided geographically between the poorer farmers in the west and their more prosperous and commercially oriented neighbors in the east, who lived nearer the mercantile seaport of Salem town. Thus, according to one textbook, "Most of the victims came from the commercial eastern end of town, the majority of their accusers from the economically stagnant western side."⁴⁰ Another explains that "The witch trials expressed the struggle between the saintly Puritan farmers of Salem Village and the town's more worldly merchants: the accusers were invariably members of the farming community; the accused were often associated with commercial activities."⁴¹

For the textbooks, the Salem episode is not fundamentally a religious event caused by fear of Satanic attack on the church, but the result of a clash between old-style agrarian Puritanism and emergent capitalism which divided the village into western and eastern camps. For example, "Those [villagers] furthest from Salem Town most resented its wealth and secularism, while those closest to the [Town] border were wealthier and more likely to be involved in modern economic practices and later to be skeptics of the trials."⁴² Following Bernard Bailyn's views about the merchants of this period whose cultural values were no longer based on the Bible but on the more worldly

³⁷Ayers (2006: 59, 61).

³⁸Divine et al. (2005: 90).

³⁹Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (1974: 34).

⁴⁰Faragher (2005: 67).

⁴¹Berkin et al. (2006: 77).

⁴²Dufor (1994: 250).

view of life, Boyer and Nissenbaum offer the same perspective. In their view, Salem witchcraft can be understood as “one world view [that] was imperceptibly yielding to another.” Thus, “what confronted Salem Village . . . was a group of people who were on the advancing edge of profound historical change. If from one angle they were diverging from the accepted norm of behavior, from another angle their values represented the ‘norm’ of the future.”⁴³ Another textbook observes: “If Boyer and Nissenbaum are correct, the Salem trials can be seen as an indirect yet anguished protest of a group of villagers whose agrarian way of life was being threatened by the rising commercialism of Salem Town,” something Boyer and Nissenbaum call the “emergence of pre-industrial capitalism.”⁴⁴ The modernization perspective, then, sees the witch trials as a conflict between the past and the future, between believers in the old agrarian religious order and the representatives of the commercial and secular forces of the future, that is, between pre-modern and modern mentalities.

This simplistic approach, which carries strong implications of cultural progress, reduces the explanation of the episode to an easy-to-understand “old/new,” “pre-modern/modern,” “religious/secular” binary formulation.⁴⁵ The unfortunate result is that history students are not exposed to decisions that individuals and groups made based on their own religious convictions at the local and wider community levels.

Two recent studies published in 2008 have examined the economic interpretation and the geographic representation of the accusations presented in *Salem Possessed*, and have raised significant doubts about them. These critiques show that there was no major economic difference between the pro- and anti-witch hunt factions in the village.⁴⁶ Nor was there an east-west pattern to the accusations in Salem village. The accusers and the accused were not geographically separated on opposite sides of the village; in fact, the accusers were distributed evenly across the village landscape.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the village was deeply divided into two opposing factions: one pro-Parris and the other against. The pro-Parris group belonged to the village covenant, and most of the witchcraft accusers

⁴³Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974: 107, 109).

⁴⁴James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle (2005: 41), Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974: 105).

⁴⁵This comment is inspired by the historian Edward Ayers’s criticism of the modernization concept in connection with theories about the causes of the American Civil War. See Edward Ayers (2005: 127–130).

⁴⁶Latner (2008a).

⁴⁷Ray (2008).

were members of this group. A recent study shows that nearly all of those who were accused of witchcraft in the village were not church members. This group, known among Puritans as the “nonelect,” were publicly derided by Parris in his sermons before the accusations began as the “vile” and “wicked” in contrast to covenant members whom he praised as the “precious” and “godly.” In the eyes of the elect, Parris’s warnings about the undermining the church made the nonelect the most likely suspects.⁴⁸

Recent scholarship therefore suggests that it was conservative religion under an extremist leader that divided the village and that Parris and his old covenant church members were at the center of it. This group had pressed for a church of their own in Salem village. They were eager to leave the liberal church in Salem town which had adopted the inclusive Halfway Covenant in order to establish their own congregation based on the more restrictive old covenant model. As Norton points out, the adoption of the restrictive old covenant meant that the much-desired sacrament of baptism was denied to the majority of village children and available only to children who had at least one church-member parent.⁴⁹ Parris’s supporters, perhaps, did not anticipate the extent of village resentment against Parris nor the effect of his harsh and domineering personality, something Richard Latner has called “a noxious mix of psychological rigidity and religious enthusiasm,” that helped turn the dispute about his ministry into a serious crisis.⁵⁰

Recent research has also paid close attention to the chronology of the approximately 950 court records and to the various people who wrote them. The result has foregrounded certain individuals. Thomas Putnam, a supporter of Samuel Parris and a leader of the large and powerful Putnam clan in Salem village, is now recognized as having played a critical role in promoting the accusations of the young female accusers in the village, particularly his daughter Ann Putnam and her young friends from church-member households. Editors of the new edition of the court records also indicate that because of Putnam’s repeated use of stock phrases in these depositions, it is uncertain how much of the testimony in his depositions represents the actual words of the young accusers.⁵¹

⁴⁸Ray (2007: 89–95).

⁴⁹Norton (2002: 18).

⁵⁰Latner (2006: 97).

⁵¹Bernard Rosenthal (2009: 31).

Attention to chronology has also brought to the fore the previously obscure figure of the Reverend George Burroughs. Norton has recently shown that the accusations against Burroughs, a controversial former minister of Salem village, started the second phase of the episode, creating a torrent of accusations that sent Salem out of control.⁵² From late April onwards, Burroughs became the face of the Satan in eastern Massachusetts Bay Colony, the “King of Hell,” as Cotton Mather later called him. Short of stature and always dressed in black, Burroughs fit the image of the Devil as “a little black man,” a popular European image mentioned repeatedly in the testimonies of accusers and confessors alike. Cast in the role of a Puritan clergyman gone bad and Satan’s high priest, Burroughs immediately became the personification of evil in Essex County. As a result, his specter was repeatedly “seen” conducting Satanic masses in the village, attended by dozens of witches, a group that later grew to the hundreds in subsequent testimonies. Norton presents Burroughs as a complex figure, behaving courageously in the face of Indian attacks and bravely at his execution (where he calmly recited the Lord’s Prayer) but poorly in his marriages (he was a wife abuser) and less than cautiously before the judges whom he does not appear to have taken seriously. The judges’ questions focused on Burroughs’s lapses in Puritan orthodoxy and his responses appeared to condemn him.

MORAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND POLITICAL ISSUES

As for the ending of the trials, several textbooks say that the trials stopped only when the accusers began to attack prominent people. One claims that “[t]he governor finally halted the trials after the girls accused his wife of witchcraft. By then public support for the trials was collapsing.”⁵³ Another explains that “he [Governor Phips] put a stop to them when the accusers pointed to people at the highest levels of society, most significantly, to his own wife.”⁵⁴ Rosenthal’s and Norton’s research, however, shows that ending the trials was a complex matter that developed over time and involved a large number of people. Phips’s decision to terminate the court of Oyer and Terminer was based on advice from numerous ministers in Boston, New York, and Hartford, as well as the opinions of important figures in the governor’s council in addition to the sophisticated voice of the Boston

⁵²Norton (2002: chap. 4).

⁵³Murrin (2005: 105). Cf. Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty (2006: 66).

⁵⁴Ayers (2006: 61).

mathematician and astronomer Thomas Brattle—all in an atmosphere of changing public opinion that occurred in late September.

Although the textbooks never take up the issue, the obvious question that their accounts suggest is whether the girls were faking their afflictions. This was the dominant view for centuries until the appearance of Marion Starkey's Freudian inspired *The Devil in Massachusetts*. From this point onward, various psychological and biomedical interpretations have appeared in the popular literature, the most prominent being the much refuted but still popular ergot poisoning hypothesis.⁵⁵ Today, Rosenthal's *Salem Story* revives the fraud theory on more solid grounds, pointing to obvious cases of fakery and pre-arranged collusion among the young accusers. By contrast, Norton offers for a more complex view, seeing not only fakery and collusion among the accusers but also the seemingly genuine afflictions of the two young girls in Parris's house. Norton is also willing to posit psychological disturbance among the several teenage refugees living in Salem village who may have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder caused by their suffering during the Indian wars. Norton, too, sees the gray area of unconscious action, such as self-inflicted stabbing with pins and biting and bleeding.

There is also the importance of the moral universe of late seventeenth-century New England which the textbooks ignore. Richard Francis in *Judge Sewall's Apology* (2005) presents the most sustained reflection on the moral and theological world view of the Salem episode. Francis's hero is Samuel Sewall, the only magistrate to apologize and to take the "Blame & Shame" of the Salem debacle on himself. Sewall's public apology five years after the trials constituted both a personal turning point for Sewall and, according to Francis, a turning point in the emergence of an American moral and religious conscience. Sewall's apology was, Francis believes, a prophetic turning away from the Puritan understanding of the world as a struggle between forces of good and evil, God and Satan, in which human beings were but pawns in the hands of superior forces, and a turning toward a modern religious perspective defined by personal moral responsibility.

⁵⁵The theory was originally proposed by Linda R. Caporael (1976). It has been refuted by Nicholas P. Spanos and Jack Gottlieb (1976). Spanos has offered further analysis in Spanos (1983). See also, Alan Wolf (2000). The simplest refutation of the Ergot theory, or any biomedical theory for that matter, is the fact that the records repeatedly show that the accusers' "fits" and "afflictions" began and ended on cue from the judges or ended upon being touched by the defendants—something impossible with a genuine illness. The primary sources also show that in between performances of their "afflictions" the accusers were perfectly healthy, something contemporary critics also pointed out.

Sewall's deep sense of moral conscience was not unique. Recent scholarship has foregrounded the moral integrity of several of Salem's victims who proclaimed their innocence instead of confessing falsely, knowing this would mean the death sentence, especially those who stood up and challenged justice of the court's proceedings.

Finally, it is worth noting the contemporary moral and political relevance of current research. Although Norton's book was completed before September 11, 2001, its dominant theme is that of widespread fear caused by the devastating Indian attacks of 1688–92 and the government's urge to strike back at easy targets. Francis's book makes the same case only in religious terms as an extremist response to a perceived threat to the Puritan religious order. As in 1692, the words "evil" and "Satan" are in the air today along with the blanket term "terrorist" and the catchall phrase "War on Terror" and "jihadist Islam." More than once authorities have removed Middle Eastern men from airplanes because of passengers' outspoken fears. Before September 11th, the notion of widespread fear causing the state to react violently and blindly on a massive scale might have seemed less plausible than it does today. The same is true of the value accorded to information gained by "enhanced interrogation" and forced confessions, which were prevalent in the Salem trials. One might also mention the creation of special courts in times of public panic and the use of novel judicial methods to prosecute suspects.

Then there is the story of the official defense, or whitewash, of the trials, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, written by the Reverend Cotton Mather at the urging of the Governor and the Deputy Governor and chief magistrate of the special court, William Stoughton. Gone from the textbooks is the perspective of the previous generation of intellectual historians, most notably that of Perry Miller. Writing in the 1930s, Miller's trenchant analysis condemned the moral and theological duplicity of Boston's two leading theologians Increase Mather and Cotton Mather for defending the trials they knew to be caused by theological errors and judicial blunders. Miller caustically observed that Cotton Mather's defense of the trials "tried to make those killings legitimate when he knew they were murders."⁵⁶

The textbooks are correct, however, in emphasizing that the typical targets in the Salem trials were, as elsewhere in New England, outspoken older women who were poor or had fallen on hard times, often at the hands of unscrupulous men. It was this longstanding patriarchal

⁵⁶Perry Miller ([1983] 1953: 204).

victimization of independent, strong-minded women that fed into the larger and more urgent fear that Satan was raising up witches to undermine New England Puritanism that drove the legal process forward.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

The witchcraft trials began in 1692 not because Salem ministers, magistrates, and accusers had no choice in the matter or because the trials were the inevitable consequence of impersonal cultural and economic forces, such as merchant capitalism, as some textbooks suggest. The trials came about because of the actions and decisions made by the local ministers and government officials who gave way to their fears of a global force of evil assaulting their city on a hill. Only later, when the trials were seen to have gone out of control did the Boston ministers realize that the Devil was attempting to undermine New England not by actual witchcraft but by arousing the fear of it. The Devil, the government later proclaimed, had deluded not only the popular imagination but also the highest minds of church and state. And no one was held accountable.

After the Salem debacle, witchcraft accusations died out in New England because the ministers and the courts refused to act on them. Indeed, something momentous happened to New England Puritanism at this time: Satan's actions would no longer be judicable in New England courts.⁵⁸ And never again would the state ask the church for advice.⁵⁹ Richard Francis draws a broad implication from the Salem debacle: "One of the enduring legacies of the witchcraft trials was to show how disastrous an overlap of spiritual and secular realms could be."⁶⁰

The direction of recent research, then, has been to focus on the religious dimension of the Salem episode, and to examine the religious factionalism in Salem village where the accusations began and continued to play out, as well as the legal, political, and religious decisions made by the authorities involved. Placing religion at the center of the Salem story, emphasizing its apocalyptic character, and examining the failures of religious and governmental leadership are something the history textbooks would do well to consider.

⁵⁷For more on this aspect, see Karlsen (1987).

⁵⁸Elizabeth Ries (1997: 164–193).

⁵⁹Miller ([1983] 1953: 195).

⁶⁰Francis (2005: 169).

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